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ABSTRACT

This digest explores uses of the Internet for early childhood educators. The first section discusses six popular features of the Internet: (1) electronic mail, which provides educators with a worldwide group of peers with whom to share information; (2) Internet discussion groups, which provide users with the opportunity to be part of electronic communities made up of individuals who share similar interests; (3) databases and library catalogs, which can be accessed remotely using telnet software; (4) gopher and World Wide Web (WWW) sites, which contain collections of information on many topics, including information of special interest to teachers such as lesson plans and descriptions of projects for children; (5) file transfer, by which users can get files or software from remote computers; and (6) community computing networks, which exist in many communities and provide members with information, including education-related information, and other services. The second section of the digest lists four common ways educators can access the Internet. First, in some states and regions, networking systems provide Internet access to educators and others. Second, access can be obtained through community computing networks. Special projects at universities and colleges offer a third way of accessing the Internet. Finally, commercial services provide Internet access for a fee. The final section of the digest offers suggestions for finding information on the Internet. These include reading Internet guide books, commonly available in bookstores; asking discussion group participants; using Internet finding tools such as Veronica, various tools for searching the WWW, and examining gopher and WWW sites that provide topical listings of Internet resources; and using the AskERIC electronic question-answering service. (BC)

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The Internet and Early Childhood Educators: Some Frequently Asked Questions

Dianne Rothenberg

The Internet—the center lane of the information superhighway—is a world-wide computer network created more than two decades ago for researchers. Recently, early childhood educators at all levels and early childhood teacher education students have begun to use the Internet to communicate and to share information. Research suggests that use of electronic networking can help teachers (especially new teachers) reduce their sense of isolation, connect with peers, and increase their sense of professionalism and autonomy (Honey & Henriquez, 1993). Internet use provides access to high-quality research and practice information for practicing educators and college students (Means et al., 1993). This digest explores the uses of the Internet for early childhood educators and teacher education students, and provides basic information on popular features and access. Actual sites and resources are described in "Internet Starting Points for Early Childhood Educators," a resource list intended to accompany this digest.

What features of the Internet are most popular?

While electronic mail is the most frequently used feature of the Internet by all groups of users, participation in discussion groups and access to the growing number of information collections available via the Internet are increasingly viewed by educators as essential.

Electronic mail (email). Research indicates that educators' most frequently used sources of information are their colleagues; electronic mail provides educators with a worldwide group of peers with whom to share information and ideas. Messages can be composed and sent from home or work at the sender's convenience, and received and responded to when convenient to the receiver. Electronic mail is fast and reliable. Most messages are received and read only by the person for whom they were intended, but email should not be considered absolutely secure or private.

Internet discussion groups. Internet discussion groups are an extension of electronic mail and are essentially electronic mailing lists. They provide users with the opportunity to be part of electronic communities made up of individuals who share similar interests rather than geographic proximity. Thousands of discussion groups exist on the Internet covering everything from scuba diving to early childhood education. Mailing list capability is also used to provide online courses, such as the Internet "Roadmap" course, which provides hands-on Internet training to anyone wishing to "enroll" by becoming part of an online "class."

Databases and library catalogs. The ERIC database, the ETS Test Collection (which catalogues and describes thousands of surveys, tests, and other measurement instruments), government databases (which often include the full text of materials), and university library catalogs are accessible through the Internet. Most are accessed using telnet software, which allows users to logon to remote databases as if their own computer were directly connected to the remote system.

Gopher and World Wide Web (WWW) sites. Other information collections on the Internet include easy-to-use gopher and WWW sites, which often contain the full text of many documents and articles. These collections frequently include articles, lesson plans, and other teaching materials; information on projects for children to participate in with their peers in other parts of the world; parenting, family, and health information; government information from a myriad of agencies and departments; and information about (and from) many cultures. "Gopher" software offers menus for easy access and usually allows users to search the information on the server by keyword. World Wide Web (WWW) sites offer graphics and links to materials housed in a variety of places on the Internet. WWW resources require that the user have available Web browser software (such as NCSA Mosaic or Netscape) and a special phone-line connection, or access to a Web browser through an online system such as Prodigy or America Online.

File transfer. On the Internet, files are easily transferred from one computer to another using File Transfer Protocol (FTP). Authors can share chapters they are working on together; large files containing software or lengthy documents can also be transmitted and retrieved.

Community computing networks. Individuals with access to a computer and modem can connect to a community computing network (or public access computer system), usually at little or no cost (NPTN, 1994). These networks exist in many communities and offer services that include electronic mail; information about health care, education, government, and technology; and connections to other networks such as the Internet. Local information is prominently featured on community computing networks, such as school schedules and directories of local social service organizations, but descriptions of exemplary national programs, tested lesson plans, and general information on education-related topics may also be included. A common type of community

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computing network is the Free-Net. Free-Nets are affiliated with the National Public Telecomputing Network.

How can I get access to the Internet?

Internet access for the general public is increasing rapidly, but this question remains a central concern for many educators who want to use the Internet. At the federal level, a number of possibilities are being explored for increasing Internet access for the education community, including legislation that promotes the use of telecommunications in the classroom and funding for access for educators. Right now, however, four means of gaining access are available.

Access through state or regional educational networking systems. Many states (Texas, Florida, North Dakota, Virginia, and others) now provide or are planning to provide low-cost or free access for educators. Inquiries should be directed to local school district offices, regional education service providers, or state departments of education to find out if this option exists in your area. If your state is in the planning stages of providing access for all educators, become an advocate for including Internet access for pre-kindergarten educators and caregivers.

Access through community computing networks. Local Free-Nets and other community computing networks are already operational in dozens of cities across the U.S., and many more are in the planning stages; a few states, such as Maryland, offer Internet access to every citizen who requests it through a state-wide network. Local public libraries are a good source of information on community information networks that may be close by and reachable through a local or low-cost telephone call.

Access through special projects at universities and colleges. Many universities and colleges provide access to the Internet for undergraduate and graduate students, and for nearby schools that take part in research or learning projects.

Access through commercial services. Dozens of commercial services, including some telephone companies, now offer connectivity to parents and educators. In addition, some professional associations offer subscriptions to online services that offer their own information and Internet access. While most commercial providers allow subscribers to use electronic mail, some do not offer access to the valuable information collections and databases on the Internet. Before making a decision on subscribing to a commercial service, early childhood educators should find out if they will be able to (1) receive and send electronic mail on the Internet without restrictions; (2) join Internet discussion groups (listservs); (3) use Internet capabilities such as gopher, telnet, lynx (software that allows information created for graphical web browsers to be accessed by people with text-only systems), and graphical Web browsers such as Netscape; and (4) access the system through a local telephone call. Many commercial vendors offer a free trial period so that you can try out their service.

Is the Internet hard to use?

The size and diversity of the Internet can make it difficult to find specific information, but a growing number of online and offline services and software can help. Basic Internet guides are now common in book stores, and some are available free on the Internet for "downloading" to your own computer.

Asking discussion group participants. Customized help in finding resources on particular topics can be obtained by participating in discussion groups or listservs.

Internet finding tools. Several Internet finding tools are available. These include general search tools, such as Jughead and Veronica (which allow Internet users to do a keyword search) for gopher sites and the Web Crawlers for World Wide Web sites. Many education sites offer extensive topical listings of Internet resources, such as Stanford University and the Illinois Learning Mosaic.

AskERIC. The ERIC Internet question-answering service called AskERIC can provide pointers to specific resources, such as penpal programs for children. Requests for information should be sent by email to askeric@ericir.syr.edu. AskERIC and its parent-related component, PARENTS AskERIC are good sources of information on all topics related to education and can be used by anyone interested in education. "InfoGuides" housed at the AskERIC gopher and Virtual Library offer pointers to Internet (and print) resources on such topics as children's literature, child abuse, home schooling, and the media and children.

For more information, request the companion Resource List, *Internet Starting Points for Early Childhood Educators*, from ERIC/EECE. This digest is based in part on *A to Z: The Early Childhood Educator's Guide to the Internet*, published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. For ordering information, call ERIC/EECE: (800) 583-4135.

For More Information

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